

# THE FUNCTION OF THE FINITE VERB IN CLASSICAL BIBLICAL HEBREW<sup>1</sup>

by

DOUGLAS M. GROPP

*The Catholic University of America*

The “enigma of the Hebrew verbal system”<sup>2</sup> has so far resisted solution largely (I believe) because the problem has been improperly formulated. (1) Most attempts at a solution assume a single solution for the system of the finite verb valid for all texts and genres of the Hebrew Bible. This, I think, leads to a dead end. (2) Most of those who treat the problem naively confuse a synchronic and a diachronic understanding of the Hebrew verbal system in their search for a solution. Most twentieth-century scholars have a diachronic solution in mind. This leaves the synchronic question inadequately addressed. (3) Until recently (e.g. Rainey, 1986; 1988; Huehnergard, 1988), most scholars have begun with the position that there are two basic significant forms in the Hebrew verbal system: a suffixal and a prefixal form.<sup>3</sup> No distinction was made between the various prefixal paradigms. Also along these lines the so-called converted or *waw*-consecutive forms are analyzed as *waw*- + prefixal and suffixal

1. This is a slightly revised version of a paper read to the Linguistics and Biblical Hebrew Group of the Society of Biblical Literature, November 17, 1990. I do not intend in this paper to provide a survey of the various attempts either in the past or more recently to account for the system of the finite verb in Classical Biblical Hebrew, but to offer a single positive synchronic view of that system in general terms.

2. To borrow the title of a recent monograph (McFall, 1982), which itself does little to clarify the problem.

3. So, e.g., S. R. Driver, in the very first sentence of his *Treatise on the Use of the Tenses in Hebrew* (1892, p. 1): “The Hebrew language, in striking contrast to the classical languages, in which the development of the verb is so rich and varied, possesses only two of those modifications which are commonly termed ‘tenses.’” Also, Joüon (1923, §111b, p. 290): “Aucun terme de nos langues ne peut exprimer exactement et pleinement la nature complexe des deux **temps** finis de l’hébreu, le temps à afformantes et le temps à préformantes et afformantes.” And Gotthelf Bergsträsser (1929, §2, p. 7): “Das hebr. Verbum besitzt zwei Tempora, das Perfekt, das durch Afformative flektiert wird, und das Imperfekt, das die Personenbezeichnungen als Präformative, die Genus- und Numeruszeichen als Afformative erhält.”

forms respectively. (4) Especially in discussing whether the Hebrew verbal system revolves primarily around a temporal or aspectual opposition, investigators have failed to distinguish between the paradigmatic or "general" meanings of the verb forms and their various contextual meanings (or "implicatures").<sup>4</sup>

The verbal system that I want to describe here is valid for Classical Biblical Hebrew prose (hereafter CBH). By this designation I mean first to demarcate prose from poetry. There is much overlap in the functioning of the finite verb between poetry and prose, but the great bulk of the most peculiar usages of the finite verb forms is to be found in poetry.<sup>5</sup> By *Classical* Biblical Hebrew I mean to exclude what I would call Late Biblical Hebrew (hereafter LBH) and Transitional Biblical Hebrew. The corpus of CBH basically consists of Genesis-Numbers (inclusive of the P stratum), Deuteronomy-Kings (minus secondary additions), and possibly the book of Ruth. Late Biblical Hebrew is defined first and foremost by Chronicles (and much of the material in Ezra 1-6). But we can extend the designation to cover a somewhat heterogeneous corpus which would include Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, the prose of Haggai and Zechariah 1-8, the Prose framework of the book of Job, and probably Jonah. I am calling Transitional the prose of Jeremiah, the prose of Ezekiel, and the secondary additions to the Deuteronomistic History. The point of restricting the corpus to CBH is not to eliminate all heterogeneous elements, but to reduce them drastically to workable limits so that a coherent system of the finite verb can emerge.

Having restricted the corpus, I will pursue the problem from a self-consciously synchronic perspective. The diachronic question is both legitimate and interesting in its own right. It is even likely to provide insights that could prove helpful in guiding us to a more adequate synchronic account of the Hebrew verbal system. But a diachronic approach can never directly answer the synchronic question. Diachronically, I basically agree with those who regard the *wayyiqṭōl* form as a vestige of an old prefixal preterite, more or less identical with the jussive, but distinct from the "imperfect" *yiqṭōl* form. I would also see the origin of the

4. The basic distinction between "general" and "contextual" meaning stems from the work of Roman Jakobson, especially in two papers (1932; 1936). Cf. also the discussion in Waugh (1976, pp. 94-99). Jerzy Kurylowicz (1972, pp. 72-93) applies essentially the same distinction to Semitic. On "implicatures" as distinct from "conventional force" or "meaning," cf. Grice (1975).

5. Cf. Joüon (1923, §111a, pp. 289-90): "Sans doute il se trouve dans notre texte masorétique, surtout dans les parties poétiques, beaucoup de formes difficiles et même impossibles à expliquer d'une façon satisfaisante. Mais il y a, par contre, un grand nombre d'exemples, principalement dans la bonne prose narrative, où la valeur propre des formes temporelles apparaît d'une façon assez claire."

form (or “converted perfect”) in a generalization of the use of the perfect for the future in the apodosis of conditional sentences.<sup>6</sup> But my interest in this paper is not in the diachronic question.

I would propose that in the verbal system of Classical Biblical Hebrew prose, there are actually six distinctive finite verb forms (or classes of forms) rather than two. By “form” I mean here significant form in the sense of a Sausurean linguistic *sign* (i.e., a composite of a formal *signans* and a semantic or functional *signatum*).

Study of the prehistory of the Hebrew verb suggests that we distinguish (at least) two prefixal paradigms. Synchronically, there are a number of forms where a formal difference correlates with a functional difference between the *yiqṭōl* = “imperfect” and the *yiqṭōl* = “jussive”:

Imperfect :: Jussive		Description
<i>yāqûm</i>	<i>yāqôm</i>	G of hollow roots without inflectional ending (2 m.s. and 3 m./f.s.).
<i>yibneh</i>	<i>yîben</i>	III-y/w without inflectional ending (2 m.s. and 3 m./f.s.). <sup>7</sup>
<i>yaqṭîl</i>	<i>yaqṭêl</i>	C stem without inflectional ending (2 m.s. and 3 m./f.s.).
<i>yiqṭalēnnû</i>	<i>yiqṭalêhû</i>	2 m.s. and 3 m./f.s. forms with 3 s. object suffix. <sup>8</sup>

The syntactic use of these forms is quite consistent in CBH, though it would go beyond the scope of this paper to document this consistency here. With Lambdin (1971, §107, pp. 118–119) I would class the cohortative, jussive, and imperative together as forming a single “volitive” paradigm.

Though probably diachronically secondary, a formal difference correlates with a functional difference between the *wayyiqṭōl* (= “narrative”)

6. This view I believe I have absorbed from Thomas O. Lambdin (unpublished communication). But I notice now that B. K. Waltke and M. O'Connor (1990, §29.6f, p. 477; §32.1.2, pp. 521–522) also argue along these lines. Note the possible examples of simple perfect with future value in the apodosis of a protasis-apodosis structure in Gen 43:14 (to which Esth 4:16 is similar); Num 32:23; 1 Sam 2:16; Jer 49:9b; Hos 12:12; Ps 127:1; Prov 9:12; cf. also 2 Chr 12:5. Since, even before the birth of the converted perfect form *waqatala* must have been common in apodoses of conditional sentences (as in Arabic and in the Late Bronze age Canaanite reflected in the Byblian Amarna letters), it is not very surprising that most evidence for conjunctionless *qatal* in apodoses of conditional sentences has disappeared in the present stage of the language. Cf. also Moran (1950, pp. 32–34; 1961, pp. 64–65); Gordon (1965, §9.5, p. 69).

7. Although we often find the longer form in jussive use. This latter homonymy may be the result of an original jussive reinforced with the “volitive” formative element *-a(M)*, i.e. *\*yabnîya* merging with the imperfect *\*yabnîyu*.

8. Lambert (1903).

form and the *wəyiqṭōl* (= coordinated jussive form). The formal difference between *wayyiqṭōl* and *wəyiqṭōl* involves a difference in the vowel of the conjunction, doubling of the consonant of the prefix, and retraction of the accent in certain classes of forms (Joüon, 1923, §47, pp. 105–107).

These oppositions between prefixal forms are not complicated by the presence of a simply coordinated imperfect *\*\*wəyāqūm*. This form, though common enough in poetry is virtually non-existent in CBH.<sup>9</sup>

There is also a clear functional difference correlating with a formal difference between the perfect *qāṭālū* and the “converted perfect” *wəqāṭālū*. Semantically, the converted perfect shares with the imperfect almost its full range of contextual meanings, though with a different statistical distribution of those contextual meanings (see Appendix 1). On the other hand, there is virtually no overlap between the functions of the perfect and the functions of the converted perfect in CBH. This last opposition is not complicated by the presence of an unconverted perfect *\*\*wəqāṭālū*. Such a form is so rare in CBH<sup>10</sup> that we may easily consider it extrasystemic. Unconverted perfects begin to show up in more significant numbers (though still sporadically) in what I have called Transitional Biblical Hebrew.<sup>11</sup>

9. In all of the book of Genesis, I am only aware of one possible candidate for a simply coordinated imperfect. *wəyiraš* in 22:17 should either be revocalized as *wəyāraš* or emended to *yīraš*. I would favor the first option since the notion of succession would make good contextual sense and it does not involve an emendation of the consonantal text. There are only six examples of simple coordinated imperfects in Deuteronomy. Five of them involve the G of *√yr*<sup>2</sup> (Deut 2:4 [*wyyr<sup>2</sup>w*]; 13:12; 17:13; 19:20; 21:21). The last four of these are closely coordinated (without any intervening words) with *yīsmā<sup>c</sup>ū*. It may be possible to emend the first, if not all of these cases into a converted perfect (compare *yīsmā<sup>c</sup>ūn . . . wəragəzū* in 2:25). *wyr<sup>2</sup>wn* in 13:12 is the most difficult form. But compare the unusual hypercorrect *yāda<sup>c</sup>ūn* in 8:3, 16 (and cf. *šāqūn* in Isa 26:16; Joüon, 1923, S 42f, p. 100). The plene spelling in Deut 2:4 could be secondary. Succession would make sense in each of these cases. The sixth case occurs in a poetically formulated proverb in Deut 16:19. The almost-identical proverb with the same coordinated imperfect can be found in Exod 23:8. Cf. also in Exod 19:3 in what is apparently a snatch of poetry. Cf. also *wanišma<sup>c</sup>* in Exod 24:7; *wəyittēn* in 1 Sam 28:19; *w<sup>x</sup>nh* 1 Kgs 11:39 (Kativ); *wəyittēn* in 1 Kgs 14:16. In the prose of Jeremiah some possible candidates are: *wəyipqōd* in Jer 14:10 (but could be poetry); *wə<sup>2</sup>āsīm* in 40:4 (but immediately follows an impv.); *wə<sup>2</sup>ettēn* in 42:12 (but preceded by negated jussives); *wəyihyū* in 42:17. On the other hand, they are fairly common in the poetry of Second Isaiah (MT): Isa 40:27, 30 (bis); 41:11 (bis), 15, 20 (ter), 23, 25; 42:14, 21, 23; 43:4, 10 (bis); 44:16 (bis), 17 (ter); 45:24, 25; 46:4, 5, 6, 7 (bis); 47:9, 11; 49:7, 18; 50:2; cf. also 44:19; 53:2 (bis).

10. In Deuteronomy the only example would be *wə<sup>2</sup>immēš<sup>2</sup> et-ləbābō // hiqšā yhw<sup>2</sup> ʔēlō-hēkā et-rāhō* (2:30). The form could be reinterpreted as a D infinitive absolute (it is nonsequential). In the book of Genesis: *wh<sup>2</sup>mn* 15:6 (l. prob. *wy<sup>2</sup>mn*); *whwk<sup>2</sup>* 21:25 (may signal anterior circumstance); *wəšillāh* 28:6 (expect *wayyistāh*!); *whhlp* 31:7 (l. prob. *wyhlp*); *whhrš* 34:5 (l. prob. *wyhrš*); *w<sup>c</sup>sh* 37:3; *w<sup>2</sup>klw* 47:22 (or past iterative?).

11. The following are possible candidates for unconverted perfects in the prose of Jeremiah: 7:31; 18:4 (bis); 19:4, 5; 23:36; 25:4; 27:5; 37:11; 37:15 (bis); 38:22, 28; 40:3; 51:64;

So far our analysis has yielded five significant forms. We might label these: (1) perfect, (2) imperfect, (3) narrative, (4) converted perfect, and (5) volitive (incorporating cohortative, imperative, and jussive). The labels are not meant to be descriptive of function, but merely to serve to designate the forms. They are as conventional as possible without being overly misleading. The term “*waw*-consecutive” would be acceptable for the narrative form, but the terms “converted-imperfect” and “*waw*-conversive imperfect” are incorrect historically, and I think also synchronically. “Short-imperfect” is also contradictory. “Narrative” has the advantage of being simple and indicating its primary (and in fact almost its sole) function. “Converted perfect” is acceptable, because historically it is derived from the perfect, while synchronically it has virtually the full range of functions that the imperfect has.<sup>12</sup>

Now we can begin to organize these five forms into a system. The relation of the converted perfect to the imperfect is functionally analogous to the relation of the narrative to the perfect in an obvious way. Conversely, the opposition between the perfect and the imperfect is more or less reproduced in the opposition between the narrative and the converted perfect. These observations lead to a four box submatrix defined by two parameters.

Perfect	Imperfect
Narrative	Converted Perfect

Presumably, within each of these oppositions, one member would be marked and the other unmarked for the parameter that defines the opposition. For pairs of meaning-bearing signs within a language, I would establish markedness purely on the basis of the *signata* of those signs. The *signantia* should be appealed to only for heuristic purposes if at all. Crucial

52:33 (bis). M. F. Rooker (1990, pp. 100–102) finds at least 34 instances of unconverted perfects in the prose of Ezekiel. In what is probably a secondary layer of the Deuteronomistic History: *wāšāʾāltā* 1 Kgs 3:11 (cf. 2 Chr 1:11); *wh̄ryšw* 2 Kgs 18:36 (l. poss. *wȳhryšw* with Isa 36:21); *wnšʿ* 23:4, *wh̄šbyt* 5, *wntš* 8, *w̄tmʿ* 10, *wh̄šlyk* 12, *wšbr* 14, *wšrp* 15; *wh̄gh* 24:14; *wšnʿ* . . . *wʿkl* 25:29 (= Jer 52:33; the second form could be past iterative, but cf. 25:30).

12. Anticipating the following analysis, really only “narrative” and “volitive” are unobjectionable. The perfect might be better designated “anterior”; the imperfect “non-anterior” and the converted perfect “sequential non-anterior.” But ultimately, pedagogy should determine the terminological issue.

among the criteria for establishing the marked member of an opposition is that it is more focused or restricted in meaning or distribution. By contrast, the unmarked member has a wider range of meaning or distribution. Applying this criterion to our four box submatrix, the imperfect has clearly the widest range of meaning and distribution, while the narrative has the most restricted range of meaning and distribution. The converted perfect is more restricted than the imperfect in that a number of the contextual uses of the imperfect are statistically fairly infrequent in the converted perfect, so that the bulk of the uses of the converted perfect fall into a narrower range. The narrative form is almost exclusively limited to the function of a simple past tense with occasional instances where it expresses what I have called "remote modality" (i.e. unlikely or undesired possibility, or contrafactual modality). So we may conclude that within this four term subsystem the imperfect is unmarked, the perfect and the converted perfect are each singly marked, and the narrative is doubly marked.

An obvious candidate for the semantic feature shared by the narrative and converted perfect over against the perfect and imperfect respectively is some notion of sequence. This is typically realized as what Robert E. Longacre (1983, p. 3) calls "contingent temporal succession," but other types of sequence such as logical consequence and purpose are also possible contextually. The not infrequent non-sequential use of the narrative and the converted perfect tends to fall into a small number of categories that we cannot go into here (see Appendix 2). Other non-sequential uses are fairly exceptional.

With this preliminary insight that  $\pm$  SEQUENCE serves as a major parameter of the system, we may recall that some notion of sequence may also be realized within chains of volitives, where the sequential volitive is directly preceded by the conjunction *wā-*. Apart from exceptional usage, volitives can have this sequential interpretation in CBH only following another volitive (or occasionally after an imperfect or converted perfect used injunctively) or an interrogative clause. In these contexts sequential volitives most typically express purpose (or contemplated result), but there are also other interpretive possibilities.<sup>13</sup> Joüon (1923, §116a, p. 314) labels these sequential volitives *volitifs indirects* as opposed to the nonsequential *volitifs*

13. The chief use of an indirect or sequential volitive is (1) to express purpose. But not all indirect volitives that are genuinely sequential are best understood in this way. (2) The speaker may invite the addressee or third party to act in the expectation that the speaker will reciprocate. This type of sequential volitive might be called a "reciprocal volitive." (3) The use of the volitive chain to express reciprocity is close to another use of the volitive chain, that is, to formulate a condition. A direct volitive fills the protasis, while an indirect volitive serves as the apodosis (cf. Joüon, 1923, §167a, pp. 512–513). This, however, is not a common formulation of a conditional protasis-apodosis structure. (4) The indirect volitive may specify the content of a directive given in an imperative of speech (e.g., Exod 11:2; 12:3, 14:2, 15; Josh 4:16; 1 Sam 9:27).

*directs*. I will adopt his terminology here. The defining characteristic of both direct and indirect volitives is the involvement of the will of the speaker, which we may regard as defining a semantic feature  $\pm$  VOLITIVE. In the case of indirect volitives the will of the speaker seems less directly involved in the process implied by the verb—but it is implicit nevertheless.

One might object that coordinated volitives are ambiguous in that they are very often capable of being interpreted as either direct or indirect volitives. This is true; a formal distinction cannot here be correlated with a functional distinction. But, interestingly a formal distinction *can* be established for the negative counterparts of coordinated direct and indirect volitives. The negative counterpart of a coordinated direct volitive is  $wəʔal-$  + jussive/cohortative,<sup>14</sup> while the negative counterpart for an indirect volitive is  $wəlōʔ$  + imperfect (Joüon, 1923, §116j, pp. 318–319). This provides the correlation between form and function that we need to establish the category of indirect volitive, and justify the generalization of the parameter  $\pm$  SEQUENCE to apply to the relation between direct volitive and indirect volitive as well as to the relations between perfect and narrative and between imperfect and converted perfect. This, then, gives us a paradigmatic matrix of six boxes defined by three parameters.

		–VOLITIVE	+VOLITIVE
		+X*	–X*
–SEQUENCE	Perfect	Imperfect	Direct Volitive
+SEQUENCE	Narrative	Converted Perfect	

\*The “x” indicates simply that we have not yet established the value of this parameter in our discussion.

It remains to ascertain the value of the parameter that defines the relationship between the perfect and the imperfect on the one hand, and between the narrative and the converted perfect on the other. This pursuit plunges us into the middle of the endless controversy over whether the opposition between the perfect and the imperfect is basically temporal or aspectual. In discussing this issue we will consider only the opposition of perfect and imperfect for verbs that are lexically non-stative. Some might

14. With second person jussive substituting for the imperative.

think this a fatal qualification, but I think it can be argued (though I will not try to make the case here) that the function of the perfect of verbs lexically stative falls outside the fientic system I am describing.

After the development of the notion of verbal aspect<sup>15</sup> in Slavic linguistics and its more general application to other Indo-European languages (like Greek), some linguists (at least from Antoine Meillet<sup>16</sup> on) tried to divide all languages into "tense languages" and "aspect languages." Linguists who accept this categorization argue whether or not the Semitic languages are tense languages or aspect languages. In fact, probably most Semitists who follow this line argue that the most basic opposition in the Semitic verbal systems is aspectual (so e.g. Henri Fleish [1968, pp. 111–114] quite consistently; Kuryłowicz in his earlier studies;<sup>17</sup> and more recently, Waltke and O'Connor [1990, §29.6, pp. 475–477]). Tense is to be derived solely from the context. It is obviously impossible to exhaust the contextual meaning of the several verb forms in terms of temporal relations. For example, the "perfect" and "imperfect" in Biblical Hebrew prose can both be set in past, present, and future time frames with, nevertheless, virtually no overlap in function. Therefore, it is concluded, since Biblical Hebrew is not a tense language, it must be an aspect language. Somehow it seems more exotic than the allegedly temporal character of the more familiar European languages.

Kuryłowicz, one of Meillet's students, in his later studies (1972, pp. 79–93; 1973) began to insist that languages that formally mark aspect always superimpose this aspectual opposition on a more basic temporal opposition. So every language that marks an aspectual opposition also marks a temporal opposition. This seems to be true for the Slavic languages like Russian and Polish, and for Greek. In all three of these languages there is a subsystem consisting of three finite verb forms in mutual opposition to one another. We can use Greek as an illustration of this triangular subsystem:

15. According to Bernard Comrie (1976, p. 3), "aspects are different ways of viewing the internal temporal constituency of a situation." Cf. further on aspect, Jakobson (1971 [1957]); Kuryłowicz (1964, pp. 24–27, 90–135); Lyons (1968, pp. 313–17; 1977, pp. 703–18); Forsyth (1970); Anderson (1973); Friedrich (1974); Hopper (1979).

16. Cf. Kuryłowicz (1973, p. 114).

17. Cf. e.g., Kuryłowicz (1949, esp. pp. 47–49; 1957–58, pp. 19–32; 1962, §89, pp. 67–68; 1964, pp. 92–93; cf. also 1960 [1953] in the realm of Indo-European. The distinction between the earlier and later Kuryłowicz on tense and aspect was brought home to me by Robert Fradkin in a paper, "On the Trail of Jerzy Kuryłowicz: The Place of His Semitic Writings in the Context of His Linguistic Output, with Particular Attention to the Verb" (delivered to the North American Conference on Afroasiatic Linguistics, Decatur, Georgia, March 1990).



	Greek	
	Perfective	Imperfective
Non-Past		γράφει
Past	ἔγραψε	ἔγραφε

The opposition between γράφει and ἔγραφε is temporal, while the opposition between ἔγραψε and ἔγραφε is aspectual. Greek also distinguishes between aorist (i.e. perfective) and present (i.e. imperfective) imperatives, participles, subjunctives, infinitives, etc.

But what do we do with the simpler morphology of the Semitic languages without this triangular subsystem and distinction of aspect in participles, infinitives, imperatives, etc.? Kuryłowicz argues that if the basic opposition in the Semitic languages is one of "aspect," we are using that term in a different way than it is used when applied to Russian, Polish, and Greek. Further, in Biblical Hebrew, there is generally no aspectual opposition between perfective and imperfective in either a future or present or abstract time frame. Nor does it exist in a volitive mode. We find an aspectual opposition basically only in a past tense framework.<sup>18</sup> But even there it must be admitted that what is being contrasted is the primary function of the perfect *qāṭal* or narrative *wayyiqṭōl* form with a secondary context-conditioned function of the imperfect *yiqṭōl* or the converted perfect *waqāṭal* form.<sup>19</sup>

One might then fall back on the notion of tense. "Tense," as generally understood, is a deictic category.<sup>20</sup> That is, it is an element within the text that points to the speech situation. Specifically, a past tense is often marked as anterior to the moment of speaking. Joüon's position seems to be that the opposition between the "perfect" and the "future" (as he calls it) is basically temporal.<sup>21</sup> Though, to be fair, he also acknowledges a secondary role of the forms in expressing various aspectual nuances.

18. It is also possible to see an aspectual opposition (perfective :: imperfective) between the performative use of the perfect and the imperfect as actual present.

19. Kuryłowicz makes this point clearly in *Studies in Semitic Grammar and Metrics* (1972, pp. 79–80).

20. Cf. Jakobson (1957); Kuryłowicz (1964, pp. 24–27, 90–135); Lyons (1968, pp. 304–6, 309–11, 316–17; 1977, pp. 677–90, 809–22); Traugott (1978); Comrie (1985).

21. Joüon (1923, §111c, pp. 290–91): "Les formes temporelles de l'hébreu expriment à la fois des temps et certaines modalités de l'action. Comme dans nos langues, elles expriment principalement des **temps**, à savoir le passé, le futur et le présent; mais elles les expriment souvent d'une façon moins parfaite que dans nos langues parce qu'elles expriment aussi certaines modalités de l'action, ou **aspects**." The position of E. J. Revell (1989, p. 3), seems to be similar: "The meaning carried by the opposition of the two categories of the indicative,

In his later studies Kuryłowicz (esp. 1973; but also 1972, pp. 79–93) describes the basic opposition between the perfect (*qatala*) and imperfect (*yaqtulu*) in Arabic in terms of the opposition of anteriority :: simultaneity (i.e. non-anteriority). That is, he disengages the question of anteriority from the deictic reference to the moment of speaking as the most basic category in the Arabic verbal system. Other linguists, e.g. Bernard Comrie (1985, pp. 16–17, 21–22, 56–82), would label the opposition anteriority :: non-anteriority one of “relative tense,” as distinct from “absolute tense” which implies the moment of speaking as its point of reference.

Kuryłowicz has first asked what are the significant forms in the language and then has determined their paradigmatic or general meanings in relation to each other abstracted from their contextual usage. He then pin-points anteriority as the key to the opposition between the perfect and the imperfect in Arabic.

Other linguists would develop a whole series of metacategories prior to an examination of specific forms in specific languages and ask instead: “What specific forms in Language A serve as exponents of metacategories *a*, *b* and *c*, etc.?” “Tense” and “aspect” (elaborated more sophisticatedly of course) would be more or less universal “inflectional” categories which must be expressed some way or other in any given language. So if historical Semitic languages generally have only two finite verb forms to express the metacategories of tense, aspect, and modality, then no single form would be exponential of one single category. The relation between finite verb forms would be partly temporal, partly aspectual, and partly modal.

Though it is admittedly difficult to decide finally between these three or four basic approaches, my approach cleaves most closely to that of Kuryłowicz—both in focusing on the paradigmatic meanings of the several significant forms, and in regarding “relative tense” as the most basic opposition between the perfect and the imperfect. (I would, however, dissent from his positive conclusions for Hebrew, expressed in his *Studies in Semitic Grammar and Metrics*, pp. 84–90.)

Following Kuryłowicz, then, the opposition between the perfect and the imperfect can be aptly defined as one of + ANTERIOR VERSUS – ANTERIOR, with reference point to be established by context. If the reference point is not clear from the context it will automatically be assumed to be the moment of speaking by default.

---

QTL and YQTL, . . . is most easily presented as one of time reference: QTL ‘past’ versus YQTL ‘present/future’,” though he qualifies his position on p. 4, noting “that the time reference of the two categories in relation to the speaker/narrator is not absolute, but is conditioned by the time reference of the context in which the verb form is used.”

On the other hand, the narrative form almost always implies anteriority specifically to the moment of speaking. And since the feature + SEQUENCE is not very congruent with anteriority per se, the common denominator between the perfect and the narrative form might be taken as + PAST. If it were just a matter of the opposition between the narrative and the converted perfect, we could interpret the opposition as  $\pm$  PAST. But the range of the perfect is considerably broader, even though it is true that the primary contextual meaning of the perfect, i.e., its least context-conditioned meaning, is as a simple past tense. In order to account for the relationship between the perfect and the narrative we need to posit a semantic rule such that + ANTERIOR in the context of + SEQUENCE, is to be interpreted as + PAST (+ ANTERIOR / \_\_\_\_\_ + SEQUENCE  $\rightarrow$  + PAST), or in other terminology, the interaction between + RELATIVE PAST and + SEQUENCE converts the form semantically to an + ABSOLUTE PAST.

The system of six finite verbal forms may be defined by the three basic parameters: (1)  $\pm$  VOLITIVE, (2)  $\pm$  ANTERIOR, and (3)  $\pm$  SEQUENCE (see chart on p. 57).

The values that these forms have in relation to one another in the system—defined by these three parameters—make up the *general* (or paradigmatic) meaning of the forms. The contextual (or *syntagmatic*) meanings of the forms are derived from their function in specific contexts. Among the contextual meanings we might distinguish further between *primary* contextual meanings and *secondary* (or even *tertiary*) contextual meanings. The primary contextual meaning is the meaning that is least conditioned by the context. We may then set up a hierarchy of contextual meanings arranged in the order of degree of contextual conditioning.

Even though we have decided that the basic opposition between the perfect and the imperfect on the one hand, and between the narrative and the converted perfect on the other, is  $\pm$  RELATIVE TENSE or  $\pm$  ANTERIORITY, there is still an important place for other categories such as aspect and modality,<sup>22</sup> as well as absolute tense, in defining contextual realizations of this general opposition. Further, I am not committed (as Kuryłowicz seems to be) to the notion that all contextual meanings or usages necessarily share

22. I am aware that many scholars would designate what I have called the volitive forms as “modal,” and this is a legitimate usage. But modality is multidimensional and other kinds of modality are expressed by the imperfect and converted perfect in Biblical Hebrew, e.g., deontic, epistemic, dynamic, and dispositional (i.e., pertaining to the disposition of the subject of the verb, rather than of the speaker of the discourse) modality. Cf. further on modality, Jespersen (1924, pp. 313–21); von Wright (1951); Jakobson (1971 [1957]); Kuryłowicz (1964, pp. 27–28, 136–47); Lyons (1968, pp. 307–13; 1977, pp. 787–849); Calvert (1971); Palmer (1979; 1986).

a common denominator of the general meaning. Rather, the general meaning of the opposition between significant forms may be *transmuted* into a different meaning in different contexts, along with the possibility that the markedness relation between the forms may be reversed in particular contexts (cf. Waugh, 1976, p. 98). A major obstacle in the way of previous attempts to establish the general meanings of the finite verb forms in Biblical Hebrew has been the failure to grasp the fact that the imperfect as the least marked form in the system has the widest range of contextual meanings, and cannot be generally characterized by any one or two of its contextual meanings.

A more comprehensive framework for identifying clause types in CBH would be helpful in specifying this contextual-conditioning. I believe that at least some of these clause types can be handled as a paradigmatic system defined by relatively few functional parameters. Nevertheless, I have found it fruitful to define the system of finite verb forms in their paradigmatic relationships independently of a system of clause types. Similarly, I believe it is fruitful to define a system of clause types paradigmatically in abstraction from a classification of the kinds of domains for interclausal relations.<sup>23</sup> If we did not make these analyses independent of the higher syntactic level in each case, significant generalizations would be missed. These significant generalizations can be specified, but I cannot develop them here. Still, it is true that the concrete realization of the functioning of the several finite verb forms is dependent on their occurrence in the several distinctive clause types. And further, the functions of the several clause types vary in their concrete realization in dependence on their occurrence in the several types of domains for interclausal relations. But a specification of these higher levels must be left for another context.

23. My approach, then, differs significantly from the stimulating work of Alviero Niccacci (1989), who, it seems to me, deliberately subordinates the system of the finite verb to a system of clause types, and ultimately to a system of two types of "text-units," (a) "narrative" and (b) "discourse."

		-VOLITIVE	+VOLITIVE
		+ANTERIOR	-ANTERIOR
-SEQUENCE	Perfect	Imperfect	Direct Volitive
	קָטַל קָם בָּנָה	יִקְטֹל יִקָּם יִבְנֶה	(ו) יִקְטֹל (ו) יִקָּם (ו) יִבְנֶה
+SEQUENCE	Narrative	Converted Perfect	Indirect Volitive
	וַיִּקְטֹל וַיִּקָּם וַיִּבְנֶה	וַיִּקְטֹל וַיִּקָּם וַיִּבְנֶה	וַיִּקְטֹל וַיִּקָּם וַיִּבְנֶה
	(וְלֹא קָטַל)* (וְלֹא קָם) (וְלֹא בָנָה)	(וְלֹא יִקְטֹל) (וְלֹא יִקָּם) (וְלֹא יִבְנֶה)	וְלֹא יִקְטֹל וְלֹא יִקָּם וְלֹא יִבְנֶה

\* Though this is the correct negative counterpart for the narrative form, the negated form does not of itself imply sequence like its positive counterpart. This discrepancy probably has to do with the semantics of negation. A similar qualification applies to other negated forms listed in parenthesis.

## APPENDIX 1

Contextual meanings of the perfect, imperfect, narrative, and converted perfect in Classical Biblical Hebrew (primary contextual meanings are marked with an \*):

Perfect:

- \* (1) Simple past tense.
- (2) Resultative (= "present perfect").
- (3) Pluperfect.

- (4) Future perfect.
- (5) Performative (or coincident) perfect.
- (6) Remote modal.

Imperfect:

- \* (1) Simple future indicative.
- \* (2) General present.
- (3) Actual present.
- (4) Past iterative/durative.
- (5) Modal (expressing various types of modality).
- (6) Relative future.
- (7) Simple past tense (as one possible interpretation) following <sup>ʔ</sup>*az*, *ṭérem*, *baṭérem*.

Narrative:

- \* (1) Simple past tense (+ succession).
- (2) Remote modality (+ succession) (fairly rare).

Converted Perfect:

Same as Imperfect nos. (1)–(6) (+ succession), but with higher relative frequency in nos. (1), (4), and (5).

## APPENDIX 2

A tentative list of categories for the non-sequential use of the narrative form:

(1) The narrative form may serve as the first finite verb form on the main-event line to introduce a narrative or subnarrative. In fact, Leviticus, Numbers (2 Kings), Jonah (and 2 Chronicles) begin with a narrative tense form representing events. Joshua, Judges, Samuel (actually both 1 and 2 Samuel), Ezekiel, Ruth, and Esther begin with *wayhî* introducing situations. It is probably true to say, that a CBH narrative normally did not begin absolutely with a narrative form outside of the special case of *wayhî*. On this view Genesis–Numbers and Joshua–2 Kings must be treated as single integral narratives. Jonah seems to be the only exception, even though the opening narrative form is *wayhî*.

(2) *wayyō<sup>ʔ</sup>mer* very often follows a verb of speaking.

(3) A narrative form may follow a form of the generic verb <sup>ʕ</sup>*āsâ* without implying logical or temporal succession, but instead represent an event specifically that was already represented generically by <sup>ʕ</sup>*āsâ*.

(4) The verb *lāqah* sometimes behaves peculiarly. The narrator may note by a clause headed by *wayyiqqah* what a narrative participant takes

along with himself on a journey *after* the journey itself has been announced through verbs like *wayyēlek*, *wayyēšēʿ*, *wayyāšob*, etc. E.g., Gen 12:5 (in relation to 12:4); Exod 4:20b (in relation to 4:18); 13:19 (in relation to 13:18); 34:4b (in relation to 34:4a). The expected logical/temporal order seems to be more usual.

(5) A narrative form may serve to summarize or recapitulate a whole narrative or narrative paragraph. E.g., Gen 2:1; 23:20 (compare 23:17); 49:28b; Num 31:54 (compare 31:51); Josh 10:40.

(6) A narrative form may contribute to the marking of the “peak” of a narrative. E.g., Gen 7:18–24; Exod 14:27b–31. Cf. especially the treatment of the former passage by Longacre (1979, pp. 113–118).

(7) A narrative form may be repeated (on rare occasions) to resume the thread of the narrative after it has been interrupted by syntactical complexity or merely descriptive length. E.g., 1 Sam 30:3 (in relation to 30:1); Jer 41:10b (in relation to 41:10a).

The relatively common sequence *wayyōʿkal wayyēšt* “and he ate and drank” is probably not to be regarded as a bonafide non-sequential use of the narrative form. We ought not assume that simultaneous eating and drinking is a cultural universal. There is some evidence, namely in Gen 27:25b, that eating and drinking may have been successive in ancient Israel. Alternatively, it is possible to view the sequence *wayyōʿkal wayyēšt* as depicting a repeated sequence.

We may draw up a similar list for non-sequential uses of the converted perfect somewhat mirroring the categories listed for the non-sequential uses of the narrative form:

(1) The converted perfect may serve as first event on a main-event line—whether (a) future indicative/epistemic modal (e.g., Deut 28:45; *wāhāyā* is especially common in this usage); (b) obligative (e.g. Lev 18:5; Deut 4:6; 29:8; the injunction signaled by *wāzākartā* seems to be non-sequential throughout Deuteronomy); or (c) past iterative (e.g., Num 10:17; 1 Sam 1:3; *wāhāyā* is especially common in this role, e.g., Num 21:9b; Judg 12:5b).

(2) *wāʾamar* may follow any verb implying speech. E.g., Lev 18:2; Num 18:26.

(3) Any converted perfect may follow the generic verb *yaʿāšeh*. E.g., Deut 31:4–5.

(4) *wāʿāsā* may follow *yīšmōr* in a way that seems pleonastic. E.g., Lev 19:37; Deut 23:24.

(5) A converted perfect may serve to summarize a chain of clauses. Cf. e.g., 2 Sam 3:21; 1 Kgs 2:31. Cf. also the refrain *ūbīʿartā* “and so you shall purge (eradicate?)” in Deuteronomy.

(6) A converted perfect may be repeated to resume the thread of a clausal chain after it has been interrupted by syntactical complexity or merely descriptive length. E.g., Deut 29:23 (in relation to 29:21).

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Anderson, J. M. 1973. *An Essay Concerning Aspect*. The Hague.
- Bergsträsser, G. 1929. *Hebräische Grammatik*. II. Teil: Verbum. Leipzig.
- Calvert, J. P. 1971. "Modality and Case Grammar." *Working Papers in Linguistics*, pp. 85–132. Ed. C. Fillmore. Ohio State University.
- Comrie, B. 1976. *Aspect: An Introduction to the Study of Verbal Aspect and Related Problems*. Cambridge.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1985. *Tense*. Cambridge.
- Driver, S. R. 1892. *Treatise on the Use of the Tenses in Hebrew*.<sup>3</sup> Oxford.
- Fleisch, H. 1968. *L'arabe classique. Esquisse d'une structure linguistique*.<sup>2</sup> Beirut.
- Forsyth, J. 1970. *A Grammar of Aspect: Usage and Meaning in the Russian Verb*. Cambridge.
- Friedrich, P. 1974. *On Aspect Theory and Homeric Aspect*. Chicago.
- Gordon, C. 1965. *Ugaritic Textbook*. Rome.
- Grice, H. P. 1975. "Logic and Conversation." *Speech Acts*, pp. 41–58. Ed. P. Cole and J. L. Morgan. New York.
- Hopper, P.J. 1979. "Aspect and Foregrounding in Discourse." *Discourse and Syntax*, pp. 213–41. Ed. T. Givon. New York.
- Huehnergard, J. 1988. "The Early Hebrew Prefix-Conjugations." *Hebrew Studies* 29:19–23.
- Jakobson, R. 1932. "Struktur des russischen Verbums." *Charisteria Gvilelmo Mathesio oblata*, pp. 74–84. Prague [ET: "Structure of the Russian Verb." *Russian and Slavic Grammar. Studies 1931–1981*, pp. 1–13. Ed. L. Waugh and M. Halle. Amsterdam].
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1936. "Beitrag zur allgemeinen Kasuslehre." *Travaux du Cercle Linguistique de Prague* 6:240–88 [ET: "Contribution to the General Theory of Case: General Meanings of the Russian Cases." *Russian and Slavic Grammar. Studies 1931–1981*, pp. 59–103. Ed. L. Waugh and M. Halle. Amsterdam].
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1971. [1957]. "Shifters, Verbal Categories and the Russian Verb." *Selected Writings II: Word and Language*, pp. 130–47. The Hague.
- Jespersen, O. 1924. *The Philosophy of Grammar*. New York.
- Joüon, P. 1923. *Grammaire de l'hébreu biblique*. Rome.
- Kuryłowicz, J. 1949. "Le système verbal du sémitique." *Bulletin de la Société de Linguistique de Paris* 45:47–56.



- \_\_\_\_\_. 1957–58. "Esquisse d'une théorie de l'apophonie en sémitique." *Bulletin de la Société de Linguistique de Paris* 53:1–38.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1960 [1953]. "Aspect et temps dans l'histoire du persan." *Esquisses Linguistiques*, pp. 109–18. Wrocław.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1962. *L'apophonie en sémitique*. Wrocław.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1964. *The Inflectional Categories of Indo-European*. Heidelberg.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1972. *Studies in Semitic Grammar and Metrics*. Wrocław.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1973. "Verbal Aspect in Semitic." *Orientalia* 42:114–20.
- Lyons, J. 1968. *Introduction to Theoretical Linguistics*. Cambridge.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1977. *Semantics*. Volume 2. Cambridge.
- Lambert, M. 1903. "De l'emploi des suffixes pronominaux avec *noun* et sans *noun* au futur et à l'impératif." *Revue des Études Juives* 46:178–83.
- Lambdin, T. O. 1971. *Introduction to Biblical Hebrew*. New York.
- Longacre, R. E. 1979. "The Discourse Structure of the Flood Narrative." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 47:89–133.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1983. *The Grammar of Discourse*. New York.
- McFall, L. 1982. *The Enigma of the Hebrew Verbal System. Solutions from Ewald to the Present Day*. Sheffield.
- Moran, W. L. 1950. "A Syntactical Study of the Dialect of Byblos as Reflected in the Amarna Tablets." Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, the Johns Hopkins University. Baltimore.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1961. "The Hebrew Language in Its Northwest Semitic Background." *The Bible and the Ancient Near East. Essays in Honor of William Foxwell Albright*, pp. 54–72. Ed. G. E. Wright. Garden City.
- Niccacci, A. 1989. "An Outline of the Biblical Hebrew Verbal System in Prose." *Liber Annuus* 39:7–26.
- Palmer, F. R. 1979. *Modality and the English Modals*. London.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1986. *Mood and Modality*. Cambridge.
- Rainey, A. F. 1986. "The Ancient Hebrew Prefix Conjugation in the Light of Amarna Canaanite." *Hebrew Studies* 27:4–19.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1988. "Further Remarks on the Hebrew Verbal System." *Hebrew Studies* 29:35–42.
- Revell, E. J. 1989. "The System of the Verb in Standard Biblical Prose." *Hebrew Union College Annual* 60:1–37.
- Rooker, M. F. 1990. *Biblical Hebrew in Transition: The Language of the Book of Ezekiel*. Sheffield.
- Traugott, E. C. 1978. "On the Spatio-Temporal Relations in Language." *Universals of Human Language 3: Word Structure*, pp. 369–400. Ed. J. H. Greenberg, C. A. Ferguson, and E. A. Moravcsik. Stanford.
- von Wright, E. H. 1951. *An Essay in Modal Logic*. Amsterdam.

Waltke, B. K. and O'Connor, M. 1990. *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*. Winona Lake.

Waugh, L. 1976. *Roman Jakobson's Science of Language*. Lisse.